

Edward Stokes, *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore: A Photographic Record*

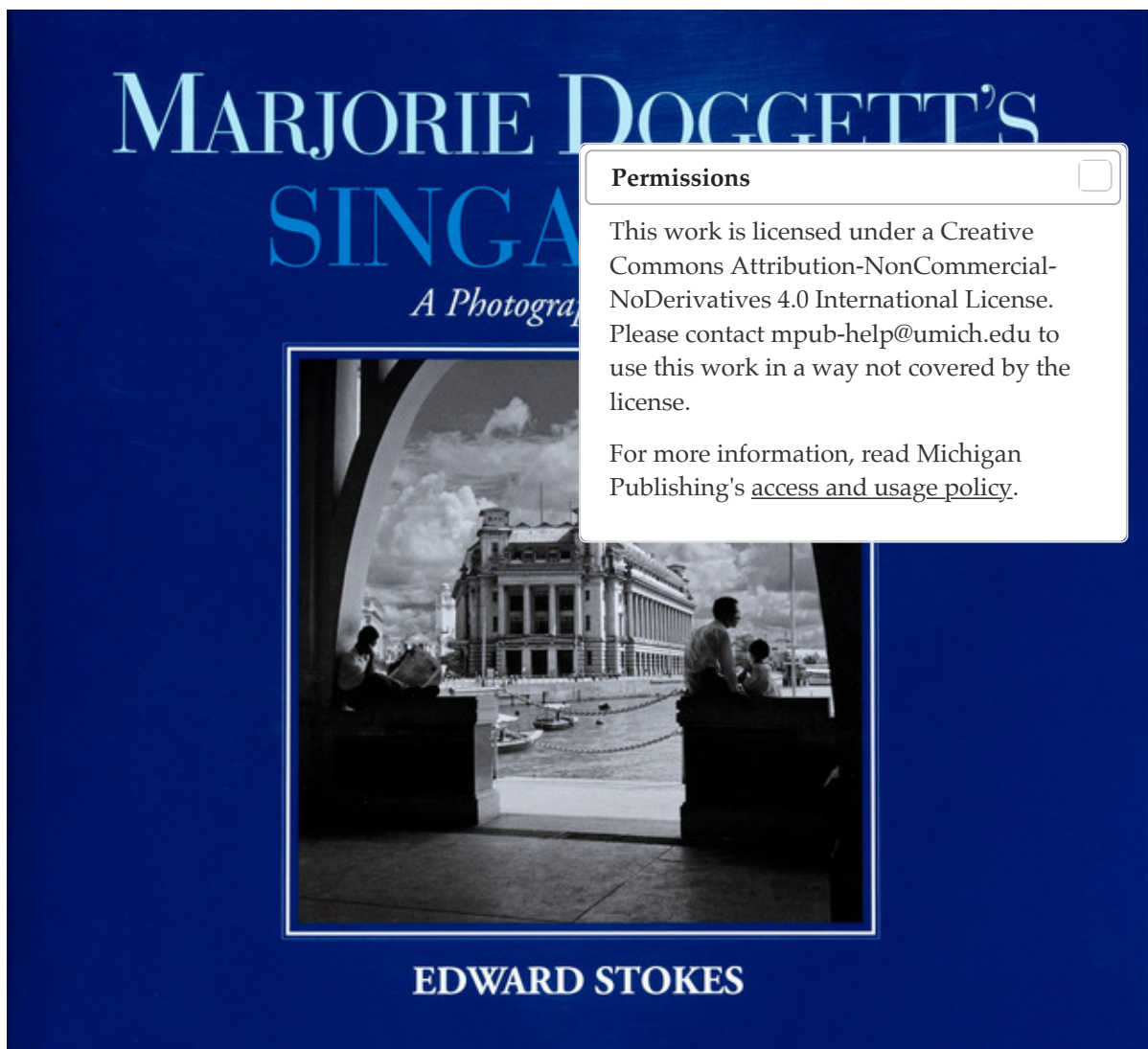
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This book is titled *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore*, prompting a naive question as to how Singapore — that island city-state with a population of between one and one and a half million during the period the book covers — could be hers. It's a question answered in Doggett's photographs and explored through Edward Stokes's research and in his text.

Pride and a sense of possession beget many photographs, but love is a deeper motive, and topophilia, love of place, has been a theme of the medium since its beginnings. Nicéphore Niépce's view from his laboratory at Gras is our first surviving photograph. The scene provided an ideal, steadfast subject for the days of exposure his photograph in bitumen on metal required. Some twenty-five years later, a vast photo survey of French monuments was the task of the Missions Héliographiques.

In both cases, the subjects themselves were the objects of deep affection: Niépce's family home on its country estate, followed by documentation of the beloved heritage of his country by the Missions' team of photographers.

So it is with Marjorie Doggett, who came to Singapore from England in 1947 with her fiancé to stay for the rest of their lives. Her solo, self-assigned photo survey resulting in her 1957 *Characters of Light* is irradiated throughout with her love of her adopted city, acknowledged, in her words, that “we know that Singapore has taken a part of our hearts for her own.”

To lose the object of one's affections is a constant human anxiety, and cities change. Urban renewal was under way in Singapore when the Doggetts arrived. Heritage was of small concern when so many of its people were squatters, or housed in slums and living in unhygienic conditions.

Doggett's city is now dwarfed beneath streamlined towers but it lingers in her seventy-plus architectural photographs in her most recent book. The opening pages of *Marjorie Doggett's Singapore* introduce us to the idea of a lost Singapore with two images; a picturesque, palm-framed view of a fishing boat off the Bedok coast and its sea wall before an approaching storm; and the pedimented and shuttered Raffles Institution. Now demolished, it housed Singapore's foremost school, which is featured on the S\$2 note — small change pocketed by the millions transiting through Changi Airport. Behind the Victoria Bridge School and the Academy of Medicine buildings of the note's montaged “Education” imagery is a view of the façade of the Raffles Institution similar to Doggett's oblique angle, but the viewpoint is more elevated and to the right, with exaggerated perspective. By contrast, her photograph is undistorted and the white building is underlined by its black plinth, cutting dead level across the frame. The unfailing care with which she made every shot is evident here as she downplays the distraction of a basketball backboard and volleyball post against openings on the building. An overhanging tree and passing clouds, as in the Bedok picture, play into the composition.



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Fig. 1. This 1957 photo of the Bedok coast captures its seafront, framed by palms and with an approaching "Sumatra" rainstorm. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.



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Fig. 2. Raffles Institution, seen here in this 1955 view, was Singapore's pre-eminent educational establishment. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

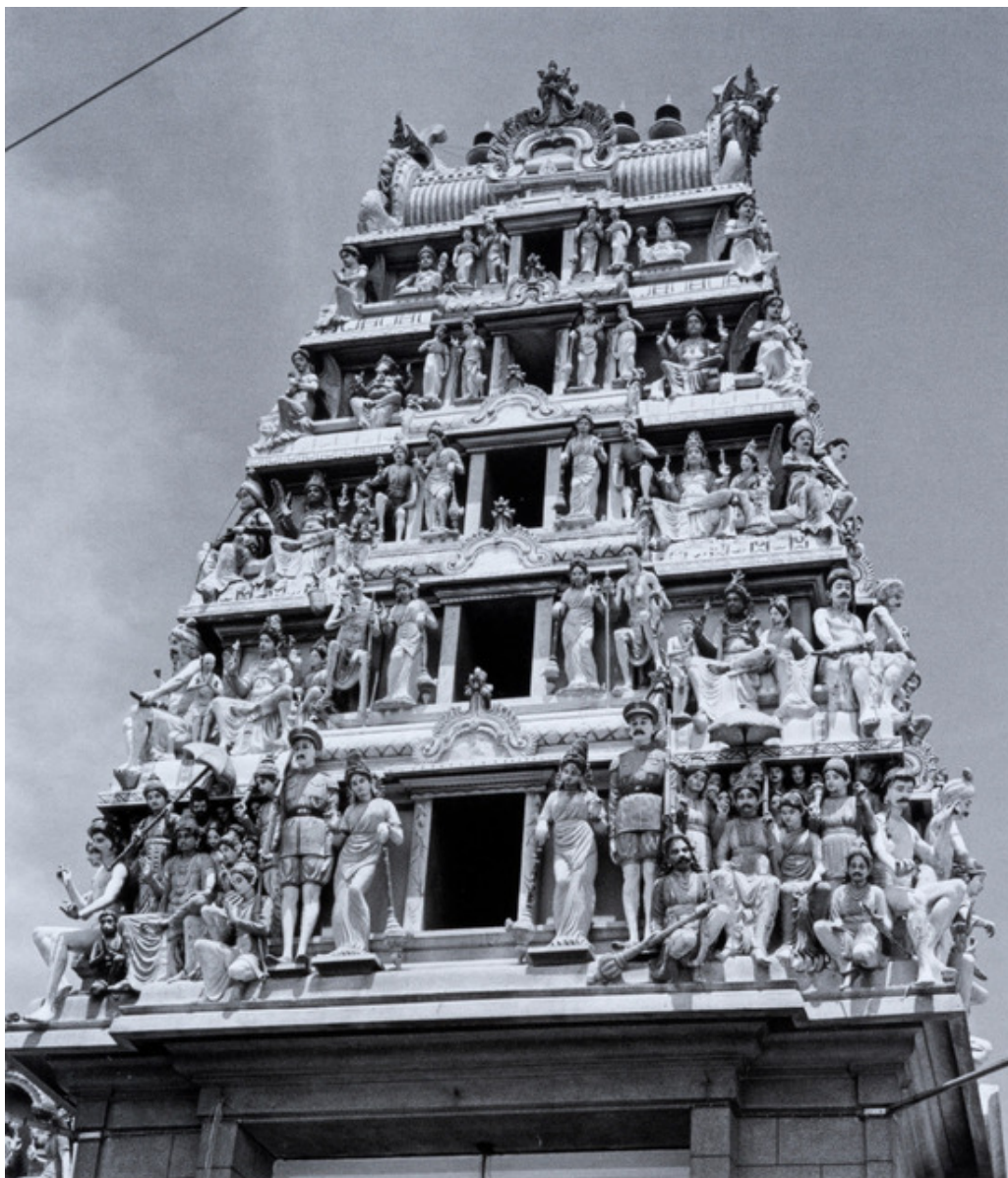
It was made with either her Rolleicord III, which she purchased in 1952, or her Rolleicord V, bought in 1955. Both were current models being produced by Franke & Heidecke, in Braunschweig, Germany. Her Xenar f3.5 75 mm Schneider was the only lens she used and provided a “normal” angle of view. Architectural photographers often use a much wider-angle lens and a large-format camera that can be adjusted to square the lines to conform to the convention of architectural drafting. To achieve that with a 75 mm on her medium-format camera meant that in each case Doggett had to place her tripod at a distance in order to cover an entire building façade, requiring some thoughtful framing. St Andrew's Cathedral is glimpsed from 100 m away, veiled behind two layers of trees and through a red filter to darken the sky, the negative exposed for mid-tones so that the white church appears incandescent — a vision in light.



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Fig. 3. Artfully framed by a foreground tree, St Andrew's Cathedral is seen here in 1956 from near Coleman Street. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

Keeping the camera level ensured that the verticals remained relatively true, though the resulting foreground expanse had to be cropped from the 2¼-inch-square negative in printing so that in most cases the images become rectangular. Only in rare instances, where streets were too narrow or the view restricted, might she point her camera upward, and for the soaring imagery of religious buildings, such as the *gopuram* tower of the Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore's oldest Hindu temple, the effect is apposite.



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Fig. 4. Bright light etches the richly decorated gopuram above the Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore's oldest Hindu temple. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

There is a solution to the issue of converging verticals: In printing, the enlarger easel is tilted for a “keystone” projection whereas the negative carrier is tilted in the opposite direction to retain focus. Why Doggett, whose photographs are devoted to architecture, never resorted to this expedient is not explained directly by author Stokes in his detailed appendix titled “Photographs: Selection and Reproduction,” though elsewhere he makes clear that her photographic training was limited to instruction in her teenage years from “a local chemist who had passed on his love of photography, together with the basic skills of film development and printing.”

Her record-keeping, a discipline drilled into her during her wartime nursing, built a thorough working knowledge of materials, exposure times, aperture, and processing based on experience. Nevertheless, due to lack of space, her home darkrooms were always makeshift affairs. No photography books were found in the library she left behind, and though Stokes cites evidence that she entered prints in the Pan-Malayan

Photographic Exhibition in 1954 and 1955, she does not appear to have participated actively in the male-dominated Singapore Camera Club.

Doggett makes no mention of progenitors, but Stokes himself, founder and publisher of several books for the Photographic Heritage Foundation and a photographer since the 1970s who is also self-taught, “devoured photographic books” by the landscape artists Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis and documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange and W. Eugene Smith. Against the German, academy-educated subject of Stokes’s 2015 *Hedda Morrison’s Hong Kong: Photographs & Impressions 1946–47*, Doggett might be classed as an “outsider” photographer.

That is not to disparage her technique; in fact, her professionalism is all the more remarkable for her autodidact status. In supporting her husband’s activities as a teacher and promoter of classical music, discussed in the chapter “Interlude: Music and Performances,” she purchased lights so that she could produce vivid theatrical portraits of local and visiting performers for Victor’s newspaper reviews — they are better than many featured on album covers of the period. Her portraits take full advantage of the imposing waist-level view, an idiosyncrasy of the twin-lens camera she used.



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Fig. 5. The Singapore-born pianist, Florence Margue-Wong, performed recitals at the Victoria Memorial Hall in 1956. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

The involvement of the couple among and with the multicultural society of Singapore through Victor's teaching and Marjorie's employment as a maternal health nurse, brought them acceptance as "locals." Stokes takes pains to stress that they were not cloistered expatriates but instead socialized with, and photographed, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian friends. Likewise, though much of *Characters of Light* was concerned with the European district set up in the colony's founding by Sir Stamford Raffles as an enclave from other ethnic groups, her photographs also portray a decaying Chinatown and the "coolies" of the river as well as the occupants of the *kampongs* of the Malay Peninsula, but, oddly, not "Little India."



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Fig. 6. Despite Chinatown's ramshackle environs, this 1952 photo suggests the life and interest that outsiders saw in the area. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.



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Fig. 7. Framed by a banyan's aerial roots, this 1957 photo looks downstream from the north end of Elgin Bridge. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

Marjorie Doggett's Singapore is important in focusing on a photographer who, though she was productive, was neither commercial nor an artist, but who remained, in the true sense, an amateur, a dedicated documentarian. Stokes writes that “the purpose of this book is to bring to life — to resurrect — Marjorie Doggett’s photos and architectural interest, shown through her experiences and photographic craft . . . The photos show, primarily, [Singapore’s] architecture and streets. The texts, mostly, are about Marjorie Doggett, the woman, the photographer, her life and experiences.” Consequently, his introduction and then the first chapter, “A Photographer’s Story,” are the longest and most comprehensive.

Mention is made of other photographers who in the 1950s were producing pictures of the growing city — for example, Yip Cheong Fun, Kouo Shang-Wei, Wong Kwan, K. F. Wong, and Lui Hock Seng, all men — but only one, Lee Kip Lin, himself an architect, was concentrating on its buildings, and only from 1965. None published a book exclusively on Singapore’s built environment before Doggett’s *Characters of Light* appeared and their interactions with her as a contemporary, if any, go unremarked.

Doggett’s fastidiousness ensured her thoroughness in researching the buildings and sites she photographed, but did not result in bland “record shots.” Many of the photographs were made very early in the morning to make the most of the slanting light that is so brief in the tropics, and to avoid shooting through crowded

foregrounds.

Her methodical and perfectionist character might lead one to conclude that Doggett was sober and conventional, but in fact she was an adventurer. She and Victor, in 1940s parlance, “eloped” and remained “living in sin” for five years. Their move to Singapore was a leap in the dark for both, inspired only by Victor’s brief war-service experience there, and although their early life as a couple living in a garage was financially austere, judging by Marjorie’s “selfies” made with the novel self-timer on the Rolleicord V, they were happy. A first journey “back home” was undertaken a full ten years after their arrival and was funded partly by the meager S\$500 advance on *Characters of Light*, which they used to buy an Opel station wagon in which they traveled overland to England via Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Anatolia and through Europe.

Despite the significant personal risks posed by the Malayan Emergency, Marjorie made photo expeditions with Victor to the peninsula. In 1956 and again in 1957, she photographed the eastern coast. Excursions to Malaysia did not stop after their son, Nick, was born, in 1958; through the 1960s and early ’70s, the family collected indigenous and rare butterflies. Though nowadays that might sit rather in contradiction to her later life, spent as a fiercely active animal-rights advocate, should we regard it as just another manifestation of a conservationist spirit? Her letters to the newspapers on both animal vivisection and the preservation of built heritage were equally passionate.

Like its photographer subject, Stokes’s book is thoroughly organized. Text at the head of the sections “Colonial Precinct,” “Port and River,” “Central District,” “East Coast Malaya,” “Places of Worship,” “Chinatown,” and “Houses and Mansions” is strictly limited to one page each, in which mostly historical information is detailed after a quotation from Doggett. Not many words are devoted to aesthetic appreciation of particular images; that is left to readers.

Further description and history of the buildings and technical detail of the photography is provided in paragraphs of about seventy words against thumbnails of each image in the appendix “Extended Captions.” Here Stokes carefully extracts from a close reading of *Characters of Light* and uses his local experience to provide the time of day of the photographs from the angle that shadows are cast across the structures.

Stokes points out that *Characters of Light* in its opening pages reproduces an 1823 poem by the colonist Raffles, “Let it still be the boast of Britain / To write her name in characters of light,” which, while it symbolizes the settlement, might also describe the way Doggett exploits tropical light to manifest her architectural subjects. One will look here in vain for the political dimensions of Singapore; neither the author nor his subject comments explicitly on colonialism — that also is left to others to interpret — though embedded in the imagery is an undeniable European perspective.



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Fig. 8. Photographed in 1956, 'Joshua': a mansion near Amber Road and Tanjong Katong Road, had a faded grandeur. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

Marjorie Doggett's Singapore generously and impartially sets out rich source material for others' scholarship. As Lily Kong, the author of *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, in her preface to this volume points out, "[A]s Singapore approaches its 55th year as an independent sovereign nation, there is a growing consciousness of history and heritage — both contributing to a deepening identity."

Indeed, this book serves handsomely as an example to others harboring (or hoarding!) a collection of historical photographs. It sets out the process of its own making. Stokes recounts, in an engaging manner, his happy discovery of the archive and rising excitement over its importance, and his persuasion of its owner, the son of the photographer, of the value, over considerations of profit, of having it conserved in an accessible institutional repository.

In her foreword, Gael Newton, formerly the senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Australia, writes that "negative archives are now seen as major historical documents in their own right." They are a visual manuscript that unfortunately is rarely preserved in the almost pristine, rigorously documented and complete form as was Doggett's. The appendix "Photographs: Selection and Reproduction" sets out the subsequent work of analyzing, arranging, and editing the archive and interpreting the associated material — letters, reviews, contracts, documents — final selection of the images for the publication, and the commissioning, from services

that were carefully tested and compared, of the expert digitization that has produced the optimum interpretation of Doggett's originals. As Newton exclaims, "Marjorie Doggett's images now sing, light carves, shadows dance and clouds billow so freshly."



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Fig. 9. This classic photo superbly evokes the port of Singapore in the 1950s. It shows the Fullerton Building, taken in 1957 from Clifford Pier. Marjorie Doggett, © National Archives of Singapore.

The book is sustained by Stokes's affection, matching Doggett's topophilia, for a couple who "exemplified an often-overlooked aspect of the postwar years: the keen, venturing people, professionals and entrepreneurs, who, on their own initiative, and through effort and commitment, contributed to the late colonial and post-independence societies that they inhabited."

James McArdle, before his retirement, was Associate Professor in the Image at Deakin University. He continues to write regularly on photography at onthisdateinphotography.com [<http://onthisdateinphotography.com>] and elsewhere.

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